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DO THE BIBLICAL COMMANDMENTS TEACH US TO BE GOOD?

- USSR -

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FOREWORD

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Following is the translation of an article
entitled "Uchat li dobru bibleyskie zapovedi?"
(English version above) by P. F. Darmanskiy in
Nauka i Zhizn' (Science and Life), No 7,
Moscow, July 1960, pages 55-57.

The faithful often argue that religion teaches only good, that it keeps passions in check, makes a man righteous, etc. "If all of you followed religious teachings, if all of you observed the biblical commandments," say the clergymen, "then there would be God's kingdom on earth." Do the Scriptures not teach that "Thou shalt not kill," "Thou shalt not steal," "Thou shalt not commit adultery," "Honor thy father and thy mother," "Thou shalt not bear false witness," "Love thy neighbor," etc? When one hears such arguments, immediately a question comes to mind -- Yes, but who teaches the opposite? The demands not to kill, not to steal, to honor one's parents, etc., are elementary standards of morality which existed long before the appearance of Christianity and exist not only for Christians alone. As regards religion, it cannot, despite all the clergymen's preachings, deliver people from crimes and vices. Furthermore, Christianity is in no condition to improve morally even the church leadership -- the Pope and bishops, the clergy and the monks. So it was in the past, so it is today. In practice, the church has time and again sanctified the breaking of the biblical commandments and has not observed them itself. Even in the Bible itself there are numerous examples of prophets, rulers, and the faithful generally acting in the name of God, regardless of any religious directives. Let us take the commandment, "Thou shalt not kill." It appears that it is very difficult to find observance of this commandment in

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the Bible. From Cain up to the God (Jehovah the Almighty himself, everybody breaks it. Numerous favorites of the "All-Highest" -- patriarchs and prophets, leaders, judges and rulers -- kill without mercy. It is even hard to name all of the places in the Bible where killing is referred to as being pleasing to God. In it there are directions to kill pagans, people of other faiths (Leviticus,xx,9), women who are traitors (Deuteronomy,xxii,20-22), etc. The Jews exterminated numerous tribes living in Palestine at the close of the second millenium B.C.; the burning of towns, killing of all living things was, according to the Bible, the command of God, who Himself repeatedly destroyed hundreds of thousands of people, including old people, women, and children.

Some of the faithful point out that in the New Testament things are quite different. However, they forget that the church considers all, not just a part of the Bible, as holy and given by God. And the Gospel puts words in the mouth of Christ, that he did not come to break the laws (that is, the Old Testament) but to carry them out. Actually, the bloodthirsty laws of the Old Testament are not abolished. They are only refined, dividing love into that for friends and that for enemies.

Truly, on one hand Christ went to the people with peace, on the other he says that he did not bring peace on earth, but rather the sword. The Son of God forbids one even to be angry at one's neighbor, yet at the same time he himself calls his foes "wolves," "false prophets," "serpents," "offspring of the viper," etc. We will not dwell on the question that Christ in the pages of the New Testament repeatedly threatens with cruel punishments all those who do not obey his will. Where is the all-forgiveness, mercy, and love?

The century-old practice of Christianity testifies that the preachers required the loving of one's enemies, all-forgiveness, and mercy only of the oppressed masses. In essence, this did not apply to the rich, the gentry, and exploiters in general. In accordance with the Bible the clergymen taught that to oppose one's master is to oppose the "will of God." The New Testament directly permitted the masters to take vengeance and to punish (Romans,xiii,1-4). "And cast ye the unprofitable servant into the outer darkness," advises Christ, "there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth" (Matthew xxv,30). These "behests" were indeed strictly carried out.

In Russia, for example, corporal punishment was meted out right up to the Revolution, and the church wholly subscribed to the custom. In the monasteries, people were

beaten, tortured, mutilated, and sometimes killed. An excuse could be always found. "And if a man smite his servant or his maid with a rod," it is written in the Bible, "and if they continue to live for a day or two, he shall not be punished, for he (i.e., the slave) is his money" (Exodus, xxi, 20-21). In the book "The Wisdom of Jesus," it is recommended: "Do not be ashamed...to bloody the ribs of a bad slave" (part 42, 1-5).

The Orthodox Church (as well as the Catholic, Lutheran, Anglican, Mohammedan, and Hebrew churches), forgetting the commandment "Thou shalt not kill" blessed unjust, predatory wars, sanctified various organizations which carried out pogroms ("Union of the Russian People," "Union of the Archangel Michael"), and in which the clergy actively participated.

The highest Christian clergy always supported and bolstered the tsarist regime. The autocracy's savage reprisals against leaders of peasant movements-- Bolotnikov, Razin, Pugachev -- met with no objections from the church, which even pronounced their damnation. After the bloody suppression of the Decembrist Revolt, priests everywhere read prayers of thanks for the saving of Nicholas I's life and in Petersburg took place a solemn ceremony of public thanksgiving, with participation of the highest clergy; and the Senate square, ostensibly "defiled by the rebels," was sprinkled with holy water. On Easter Day, 22 April 1861, General Drenyakin, who had been sent to the Penza Guberniya to "put down" peasants, telegraphed the Tsar: "I have the honor to wish Your Majesty loyal greetings on this bright holiday, and to report that everything is proceeding as desired." And the "divinely anointed one," who had ordered the reprisals against the rebels, answered the butcher-general: "Christ has arisen! Happy Easter! I thank you for your greetings and your efficient dealing with the problem."

Numerous similar instances can be cited. It should also be noted that the pre-revolutionary church press, keeping in line with the Bible, demonstrated the "lawfulness" of the death penalty. Bishops' messages dealt with this. During the period of the workers' and peasants' revolutionary struggle with Tsarism, when the advocates of religion found themselves powerless to stir the oppression by words alone, the clergy (after the example of the monks of the Glinskaya Monastery) took up arms, staining their hands with the blood of innocents.

Such is the Christian "Thou shalt not kill" in practice.

In the Bible is also the commandment "Thou shalt

not steal." Here one can find many examples of appropriating another's property and even of robberies. For the sake of plunder and profit, the Jews, led by "God-fearing" men, annihilated whole peoples: Moabites, Amalikites, Philistines, and others. They seized their cities, fields, cattle, and property and made slaves of the prisoners who were left alive. The Bible not only does not condemn all this, but depicts it as fulfillment of the will of the "All-Highest." Such actions are particularly hailed, if a certain part of the plunder is dedicated to God.

For centuries the church has justified the inhuman exploitation of man by man, has represented slavery and serfdom as something established by the "divine ruler," declared the riches of parasites to be the "gift of God," and the poverty of the oppressed -- a result of laziness. It also gratified in every possible way the strong men of "this world" who by "lawfully" stolen means built temples, monasteries, gave the clergy large presents. Some such "benefactors" were made saints. The clergy itself tried by hook or by crook to acquire better lands, forests, various valuables, to live on the fruits of exploiting the slaves and serfs, and to steal huge riches from the masses. They read scriptural texts about the simple life only at the graves of the poor, and themselves sought to enjoy life on this earth.

The hypocrisy of religious morality becomes particularly evident if one considers their attitude towards the commandment "Thou shalt not commit adultery." While preaching this commandment, the church at the same time indifferently blessed misalliances and weddings by compulsion, and did not consider marriage legal if it had taken place against the wishes of the parents or the master. Divorces were forbidden, the only exception being by reason of adultery. In such a way the church itself suggested ideas incompatible with elementary moral standards. In order to obtain a divorce it was necessary truly to break the commandment not to commit adultery and the commandment not to give false witness, that is, to find two people who would affirm (regardless of the truth) the faithlessness of one of the spouses.

During the period of serfdom there also existed the infamous custom of "the right of the first night," according to which the peasant maiden had to spend her wedding night with the master-landowner, not the husband. The clergy forgot all about the biblical commandments and did not say a single word about this custom. Furthermore, the "pillars" of the church tried to legalize such deeds. For example, Vasilii the Great, in his canonical rules,

decided not to punish a master for the rape of a woman serf, and decided not to punish one "for adultery, if an unmarried has sinned" (rules 21 and 49). It is no accident that one of the revolutionary workers' songs goes:

Straight from the church was led
The bride to the lord's bedroom.
Where were the priests then,
Where was the Gospel, the cross?

The bishops, priests, and monks themselves did not observe the commandment not to commit adultery. The monasteries in particular were known for debaucheries. So it was in the past, so it remains today. "Rulers" and "fathers" hide themselves behind pretty words and promises, but actually in moral terms they stand much lower than those who do not know any "divine" behests. Many of the "figures" the Christian church has made saints, were profligates who had numerous wives and concubines (for example, the Byzantine emperor Constantine; the Russian grand prince Vladimir, etc.). Nevertheless, the clergy named them "like to apostles," canonized them, urged and still urges the faithful to worship them.

Let us note, that even in the Bible can be found quite a number of immoral discourses and acts. There is even wife-trading by pious men for the sake of their personal well-being, and the sin of sodomy, and cohabitation of the "pious" Lot with his "pious" daughters, and the fornicatrix Raav, who found herself a "saint" by the efforts of priests, etc. In the name of God the Bible sanctifies polygamy and marriage between relatives, telling of King Solomon's hundreds of "lawful" wives and "unlawful" concubines, and of a number of other similar "exploits." And, it is strange that the clergymen who reiterate over and over about the high moral meaning of religion and "holy" books, forget all about those facts.

Of course, in the Bible one may find separate expressions and advice which in itself contains nothing bad. The commandments, already mentioned above, are by themselves acceptable. Yet they literally disappear in a mass of barbarous, immoral statements and accounts, and by no means serve as a basis for the church's activities. In addition, the prohibitions to kill, lead a dissolute life, give false witness, etc., do not contain anything divine. Those standards of morality were formed during the long historical progress of morals -- which, by the way, began before the emergence of religious consciousness had developed independently. Religion was never characterized by some particular morality of its own; it only sanctified those ethical rules and customs which arose and existed

under certain socio-economic conditions, and were formed by them, not by God. Therefore the clergymen idolized the slave-holding, the serf-owning, and the bourgeois morality. "The social principles of Christianity," wrote K. Marx, "justified slavery in antiquity, extolled the serfdom of the Middle Ages and, in addition, are able, if necessary, to defend -- though with a pitiful grimace -- the oppression of the proletariat." At the present time the clergymen even try to adapt themselves to the Socialist morality prevailing in our society.

However, all such strivings are doomed to failure. Communist morals are the highest form of morality, having nothing in common with religion or with other survivals of the past in the minds of the people. Although Communist morality is yet very young in comparison with religious standards, the whole world each year is convinced of its great vitality, genuine love for mankind, and beauty. The courageous foursome, who won the single combat with an infuriated ocean and 49-days' hunger, were brought up in the spirit of Communist morality. /Reference to four Soviet seamen adrift at sea for extended period./ The simple weaver, who initiated an unprecedented movement to help those lagging behind in production -- even at her own loss -- was raised by the rules of Communist morality. The Soviet man, brought up under the ethical standards of Communism, everywhere turns out to be the bearer and herald of new, truly humane attitudes, which summon the admiration of millions of people around the Earth. Is this perhaps something of the religious outlook? No, no and once more, no!

Communist morality, for the first time in history, is really beneficial to people, is truly humane in the broadest and deepest sense of that word. Nobody shall succeed to efface that greatly significant fact.